

Now, the Rest of the Story

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By LCdr. Todd Bode

Good on these young whippersnappers for not diming out their chain of command, but I believe Grampaw Pettibone would ask just how it is that our antihero found himself waving off a smidge below that hallowed fuel state we call “bingo.”

Arguably, the last pass never should have happened. With 302 on downwind, Sting One called for the divert on the grounds our nugget, fresh from the FRS without his night-tanking qualification, was not qualified for blue-water operations. The communications machine had churned to get permission from the captain to divert him. In hindsight, this time-critical-decision loop would have gone a lot smoother if we had made sure the captain had been pre-briefed on our young exception to the blue-water standard.

In the meantime, CATCC prepared to hook him in early and squeeze in one last attempt before bingo. Our pilot didn’t hear the attempt to turn him in at four miles—more on this later—but responded at six miles. With permission still not received for the divert, a dubious sentiment prevailed: “He’s almost there. We might as well give him one more shot.”

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Back to that four-mile hook. Trying to hook in a nugget at four miles on his first night sortie in the fleet, and in the North Arabian Gulf (NAG), is paramount to missing the forest for the trees. The overarching goal was not to get him to the ball call above bingo, but to get him on deck by setting him up for a successful pass or by diverting him at or above bingo state. In the NAG, where we regularly experience HUD-limiting winds at the pushover, a nugget who gets turned in at four miles likely will use the first three miles inbound trying to find lineup. And let’s face it, he wasn’t on his A-game to begin with.


One slice farther back in this Swiss cheese, we should have asked whether NATOPS bingo numbers

were conservative enough in this case. By using the book answer, we counted on a perfect bingo profile from a brand-new nugget, and we accepted a best-case, on-deck fuel state of 1.5, in spite of the odds against him: an unfamiliar field, foreign controllers, and a poor grasp of geopolitical boundaries. On top of that, we blew off (no pun intended) upper-level winds, a 200-pound-fuel miscalculation.

Gramps also might question the decision to send a level II pilot, who was on his first night-tanker mission, to run down a nugget on his first night sortie in the NAG when there was another viable option. The primary tanker, who had been hawking 302, was a seasoned JO with enough fuel to escort him to Ali Al Salem, but not make it back. In choosing our notably less experienced secondary tanker, we put the cart before the horse: convenience, one jet diverted (instead of two), over safety.

Our antihero no doubt should have been flying with his divert field selected as the steer-to waypoint, but the buck doesn’t stop there. When he requested to know which waypoint it was—a knowledge deficiency for which we must assume some responsibility—our CATCC rep knowingly referenced the waypoint in the Operation-Iraqi-Freedom (OIF) standard load. Because of a recent change to the OIF standard-waypoint load, this load differed from the Sea-Dragon load, which our nugget was using, and sent him drilling toward the infamous “black line,” which defines the border of Iranian-claimed airspace.

Lest I’ve violently stepped on any toes, I’ll offer up that there was enough collective buffoonery for all of us to claim a share. Our carrier and air-wing team has been rockin’-and-rollin’ in support of our troops on the ground in Iraq, and, admittedly, the recent influx of FRS grads didn’t peg our collective ORM meter as it should have done. Since the adrenaline and cortisol rush of this night’s events, the squadrons, air wing, and CATCC have been operating like a well-oiled and, appropriately, risk-aware, machine.

OK, who put the McDonald’s job application in my mailbox? 

LCdr. Bode flies with VFA-113.